

Happy Dead Witnesses Day

Revelation 11:1-19

Introduction: Two of my heroes in Church History are Michael and Margaretha Sattler. They were husband and wife and evangelical Anabaptist in the early 16th century. Devoted followers of and witnesses to Christ, their lives were cut short by martyrdom in their 20's. The record of their death has been providentially preserved as a testimony of their faithfulness. "The torture, a prelude to the execution, began at the market place where a piece was cut from Sattler's tongue. Pieces of flesh were torn from his body twice with red-hot tongs. He was then forged to a cart. On the way to the scene of the execution the tongs were applied five times again. In the market place and at the site of the execution, still able to speak, the unshakable Sattler prayed for his persecutors. After being bound to a ladder with ropes and pushed into the fire, he admonished the people, the judges, and the mayor to repent and be converted. Then he prayed, "Almighty, eternal God, Thou are the way and the truth: because I have not been shown to be in error, I will with thy help to this day testify to the truth and seal it with my blood."

As soon as the ropes on his wrists were burned, Sattler raised the two forefingers of his hands giving the promised signal to the brethren that a martyr's death was bearable. Then the assembled crowd heard coming from his seared lips, "Father, I commend my spirit into Thy hands."

Three others were executed. After every attempt to secure a recantation from Sattler's faithful wife had failed, she was drowned eight days later in the Neckar." (William Estep, *The Anabaptist Storys* p. 47).

Today there is a memorial plaque at the site of Michael Sattler's execution. It reads, "The Baptist Michael Sattler was executed by burning after severe torture on 20 May 1527 here on the "Gallows Hill". He died as a true witness of Jesus Christ. His wife Margaretha and other members of the congregation were drowned and burned. They acted for the baptism of those who want to follow Christ, for an independent congregation of the faithful, for the peaceful message of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Baptist historian William Estep says, "Perhaps no other execution of an Anabaptist had such far-reaching influence" (Ibid).

- God has had many superlative witnesses throughout history like Michael and Margaretha who have sealed their witness with their blood. His word promises there will be many more. And, He also promises that it is by their witness that his kingdom will come. The world may celebrate their death but our God will honor their death and use it for the advancement of His kingdom and glory.
- Revelation 11 is universally viewed as a challenging and difficult text to interpret in terms of the details. It is a continuation of an interlude or parenthesis that runs from 10:1-14:20. It provides additional insight as to what

takes place during the 3 series of judgments God unleashes on planet earth: the seals (ch. 6), trumpets (chs. 8-9) and the bowls (ch. 16). However, there are particular spiritual lessons that stand out upon which most students of the Apocalypse can agree. Duvall provides a good summary of these lessons:

- Although God’s people are protected spiritually, they are still vulnerable to persecution.
- God’s people are called to speak prophetically.
- The world will often react with hostility to the church’s prophetic witness.
- God promises to raise his people from the dead, reversing their temporary defeat at the hands of evil powers.
- The witnessing church possesses tremendous power and authority to carry out its mission (*Revelation*, 149).

Our verse by verse study of this chapter will explore and unwrap these theological themes. Humility is again the order of the day as we encounter numerous hermeneutical landmines.

I. God’s plan marches on in spite of opposition 11:1-2

- Following his recommissioning to “again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings” (10:11), John is “given a measuring rod like a staff” (11:1). He is given a modern yardstick. He is then told to “Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there.”

The Old Testament background is Ezekiel 40-42 and perhaps Zechariah 2:1-5. The idea is one of ownership and protection (Osbourne, 409). However in verse 2 John is told, “but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for 42 months” (v. 2). This recalls the words of Jesus in Luke 21:24 where our Lord says, “and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” Three issues immediately confront us: 1) what is the temple of God; 2) what is the holy city, and 3) how do we understand 42 months?

- Working backwards, I take the 42 months to be 3 ½ years though those who take it to mean simply a short period of time are tracking in the right direction (see Dan. 9:24-27; Matt. 24:22). I also believe John’s 1st century audience would have understood the holy city to be Jerusalem, though I understand why some believe it represents the church (Mounce, 215) or even “the earthly, “not yet” aspect of the future heavenly Jerusalem (see 3:12; 21:2; 10; 22:19)” (Duvall, 149).
- The big question, however, is what is the temple of God? Here we must consider both historical and spiritual realities. Historically two temples have been built on the temple mount in Jerusalem. First was the temple built by King Solomon that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587-86 B.C. The

second was Zerubbabel's temple that was later magnificently enlarged by Herod the Great only to be destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. Spiritually the idea of the temple or temple theology is multifaceted and developing. Jesus used the image of the temple to refer to Himself in John 2:19-22. The church is called the temple of God in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and Ephesians 2:21-22. Believers in Jesus are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The temple in Revelation is referred to as both the place where God is present and even as God Himself (3:12; 7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5-6, 8; 16:1, 17; 21:22). So, how are we to understand the temple in 11:1-2? Many fine scholars believe it represents the church, the Christian community. They see no reason for us to expect a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. However, based upon what Jesus says in Matthew 24:15, and Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, I believe there will be a future temple built during the last days. I believe there may also be a millennial temple as described in Ezekiel 40-47. Now, who are those who worship in this temple? Are these Jews who worship in belief in Jesus as Messiah, or is it Jews who worship there in unbelief? We cannot be sure. However, Ladd, who does not anticipate the rebuilding of a literal temple, has a perspective concerning the future of Jewish persons I find compelling and heartily endorse. "[Another] interpretation sees here a prophecy of the preservation and ultimate salvation

of the Jewish people. In the day when John wrote, Jerusalem had been long destroyed and the temple laid waste. Just before the conflagration of A.D. 66-70, the Jewish Christian community had fled from Jerusalem to the city of Pella in Transjordan. This had augmented the hostility of the Jews toward the Jewish Christian community and hastened the complete break between the synagogue and church. The burning question among Jewish Christians was, "Has God rejected his people?" (Rom. 11:1). Paul devoted three whole chapters to this problem and concluded that finally the natural branches (Jews) which had been broken off the olive tree (the people of God) would be grafted back onto the tree; "and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). It is difficult to interpret these three chapters symbolically of the church – the spiritual Israel. They teach that literal Israel is yet to be included in spiritual Israel.

Our Lord himself had anticipated this. After his lament over Jerusalem, he asserted, "For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt. 23:39). Again, he implied the salvation of Israel when he said, "Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24)...the prophecy in Revelation 11 is John's way of predicting the preservation of the Jewish people and their final salvation." (Ladd, 150-51).

Regardless of the exact and precise details, one thing is certain. God's plan marches on. Sinful humanity has its say for a day. The Lord God almighty has His say for all eternity.

II. We have God's promise of protection to complete our ministry 11:3-6

- God in sovereign power gives the holy city over to the nations to be trampled for 42 months. His place and His people are the objects of intense opposition (v. 1). However, at the same time God will raise up his two witnesses who come in power and spirit of Moses and Elijah. They will proclaim His word and display His power (11:3-6). No one will be able to harm them until "they have finished their testimony" (v. 7).
- To navigate these verses let's ask and answer basic questions of interpretation.
 - 1) Who are the two witnesses? There are numerous suggestions which include:
 - 1) Old Testament and New Testament
 - 2) The witnessing Church
 - 3) Witnesses in general
 - 4) Elijah and Enoch
 - 5) Elijah and Moses
 - 6) Zerubbabel and Joshua

- 7) Elijah and Elisha
- 8) James and John
- 9) Peter and Paul
- 10) Law and Prophets
- 11) Law and Gospel
- 12) Israel and Church
- 13) Israel and the Word
- 14) Churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia
- 15) Spirit of Elijah and Moses

It seems best to see 2 witnesses, as individuals or a group, who come in the spirit of Moses and Elijah to fulfill a specific ministry given to them by God.

- 2) What will they do? They will prophesy for 1260 days (3 ½ years) in sackcloth, the garments of grief, humility, mourning and repentance.
- 3) How? They will do their ministry as two olive trees and 2 lampstands that represent God on the earth. This draws from a vision in Zechariah 4 where there are two men named Joshua (the high priest) and Zerubbabel (the governor under the Persian King Darius) [Mounce, 218]. Olive trees provide oil for lamps. Lamps provide light. Mounce nails it, “They are the bearers of divine light (Matt. 5:15-16). These light bearers are also

olive trees in that “the oil of the Spirit...keeps alive the light of life” (cf. Zech. 4:16, Mounce, 218). Their power clearly is reminiscent of the ministry of Moses and Elijah (vs. 5-6; cf. Ex. 7:14-18; 8:12; 1 Kings 17:1; 2 Kings 1:10ff). There is no reason to deny their supernatural abilities and actions. God worked in these ways in the past and He will do so again in the future.

- 4) When do they come? During the Great Tribulation or Daniel’s 70th week. It was expected that Moses (Deut. 18:18) and Elijah (Mal. 4:5; cf. Matt. 11:14) would come at the end of history. Well, here they are. They stand before the God of the earth on the earth of God preaching His Word and revealing His power. And, they are untouchable until their work is done. The Baptist missionary to China, Lottie Moon, said, “I have a firm conviction that I am immortal ‘til my work is done” (*Ten Who Changed The World*, 64). She is right. And, that is a truth every servant of God can claim.

III. We can expect persecution and even death for telling the truth 11:7-10

- The faithful missionary to the Auca Indians, Jim Elliott, had the same conviction as Lottie Moon. In a letter to his parents he wrote, “Remember you are immortal until your work is done. But don’t let the sands of time get

into the eyes of your vision to reach those who still sit in darkness. They simply must hear” (*Ten Who Changed the World*, 81).

- Will these two witnesses know they only have a short time? I think so. They certainly will not let the sands of time get into their eyes. When “they have finished their testimony” (“witness,” *marturian*) they are attacked and killed by someone called “the beast.” Actually he “wars” against them until he murders them. This beast rises from the abyss, the bottomless pit, the realm of the demonic. This is the first of 36 references to the beast in Revelation. A more detailed description of him is found in chapters 13 and 17. He is clearly the one John calls in his epistles “the Antichrist” (1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7) and Paul “the man of sin” or “the lawless one” (2 Thess. 2:8-9). He is a Satan possessed and demonically inspired person who will rule the world for a brief time as a counterfeit Christ. He will murder God’s prophets and then disgrace them by denying them burial (v. 7). This will take place in what John describes “symbolically as Sodom and Egypt, the place where our Lord was crucified (v. 8). Sodom, a city, represents that which is abominable, immoral and wicked. Egypt, a nation, symbolizes idolatry, oppression, slavery and suffering. John appears to separate Jerusalem from Sodom and Egypt in terms of symbolism. The phrase “where the Lord was crucified” makes more sense if the identification is literal Jerusalem, though

all the evil cities and nations of the world have their hand in the death of King Jesus (cf. Babylon in chs. 17-18). Jerusalem in this day will be no better than Sodom or Egypt. A Jew hearing this would be shocked, scandalized, angered. Yet, her wickedness in that day will approach her wickedness when she crucified the sinless Son of God. These 2 superlative witnesses will be treated in the same shameful fashion as their Lord. “A slave is not greater than his master (John 15:20).

Peoples, tribes, tongues and nations (note again the all-encompassing 4-fold division) will 1) see their dead bodies left in the street and exposed in shameful humiliation for 3 ½ days (v. 9). 2) They will rejoice (cont.) and make merry (cont.) and send gifts! (v. 10). A new holiday will be established in order to celebrate the deaths of the 2 men of God. We can call it “Happy Dead Witnesses Day.” What an incredible indictment of human depravity, wickedness, sinfulness and evil.

Incredibly, this is the only mention of rejoicing in the book of Revelation.

Men and women will hate God so much that only in the killing of His precious servants are they made happy. They hated Him. They will hate us (John 15:18).

IV. We can be assured God will honor our faithful service

11:11-14

- In Romans 12:19, Paul cites Deuteronomy 32:35 and writes, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” “Payday someday” now comes to the earth dwellers (v. 10). After 3 ½ days, “a breath of life (*pneuma zoes*) from God enters them, and they stood on their feet.” The 3 ½ days recalls the entombment of our Lord. The breath of life harkens back to Ezekiel 37 where God revives the valley of dry bones by His spirit. This is resurrection language!
 - Not surprisingly, “great fear fell on those who saw them” (v. 11), those from among the various “tribes and languages and nations” (v. 9). This is certainly one of the great understatements of the Bible! But for the earth dwellers it gets worse (though better for some). Having been resurrected, they now ascend into heaven with their enemies watching them (v. 12). This is no secret or hidden rapture. This is an historical and visible moment for the eyes of sinful humanity. Some believe this is the resurrection of the church (Mounce, 223). Some believe this is a reference to the conversion of Israel (Ladd, 158). I still believe it is best to see two historical persons, but the bottom-line is clear: God honors His faithful saints.
- Verse 13a records God’s judgment on evil Jerusalem. 7,000 people (literally names of men 7,000) are killed.

Verse 13b records man's response – The rest (in Jerusalem): 1) were afraid and 2) gave glory to the God of heaven. I believe this speaks of a genuine conversion of a great multitude of Jews in Jerusalem. John MacArthur points out that giving glory to the God of heaven is a mark of genuine worship in Revelation and elsewhere in Scripture (cf. 4:9; 14:7; 16:9; 19:7; Luke 17:18-19; Romans 4:20). “This passage, then, described the reality of the salvation of Jews in Jerusalem, as God fulfills His pledge of blessings for Israel (Romans 11:4-5, 26)” (Rev. vol. 1, p. 305).

God vindicated his saints who serve Him and He deals with sinners who reject Him. The first group receive grace and mercy. The second group receives judgment and wrath. Verse 14 sums up the situation: “The second woe (the 6th trumpet) has passed; behold, the third woe (the 7th trumpet which contains the 7 bowls of ch. 16) is soon to come.” For those celebrating “Happy Death Witnesses Day,” turn out the lights. The party is over.

V. We can be certain God's kingdom will come and He will be glorified

11:15-19

- For almost 2000 years Christians have prayed a prayer taught to us by Jesus, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). In Revelation 11:15-19 that day has come. In words immortalized by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759) in his “Messiah” (1741), “The

kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.”

- It is important for us to remember the 7th seal contains the 7 trumpets and the 7th trumpet contains the 7 bowls. Thus there is a sense in which the 7th seal, 7th trumpet and the 7th bowl bring us to the end. We might say it like this: the 7th seal brings us to “the end,” the 7th trumpet to “the very end,” and the 7th bowl to “the very, very, end.”
- In verse 15 the 7th trumpet sounds accompanied by loud voices in heaven and the glorious declaration that the kingdom of God has come to this world and our God and His Christ will reign forever. Psalm 2 now finds its eschatological fulfillment! Verse 16 finds the redeemed (represented by the 24 elders) once more falling on their face in a posture of praise and worship (cf. 5:8, 14; 7:11, later 19:4).
- Verses 17-18 is the song they sing. In 4:10-11 they celebrated the God who created and sustains all things. In 5:8-14 they worshiped the Lamb who was slain and redeems the nations by His blood. Now they give thanks to the God who brings history to its climatic end and who begins His cosmic and eternal reign. The song begins by focusing on the person of our God. He is the “Lord God Almighty (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). There is no god as powerful and omnipotent as our God. And, He is the one “who

is and who was.” The phrase “and who is to come” is omitted because He has come and His reign inaugurated. (“You have taken your great power and begun to reign”).

- Verse 18 reflects Psalm 2 and is a declaration of God’s righteous judgment and wrath upon a defiant and rebellious world. The nations were angry and received God’s righteous anger in return. “The dead,” those spiritually separated from God, face their judgment at His Great White Throne (Rev. 20:15), judged according to their works. In stark contrast, there will be rewards for those who love and follow the Lord and the Lamb. Interestingly, 5 different categories are used to identify the people of God: 1) servants (lit. “slaves”); 2) prophets; 3) saints; 4) those who fear Your name; 5) small and great. The song concludes by simply noting that the “Lord God Almighty” will destroy “the destroyers of the earth.” MacArthur again points out, “This is not a reference to those who pollute the environment, but to those who pollute the earth with their sin. That includes all unbelievers, especially in the context of Revelation the false economic and religious system called Babylon (cf. 19:2), Antichrist and his followers, and Satan himself, the ultimate destroyer” (vol. 1, 320).
- Verse 19 closes the chapter with heaven’s response to the song of verses 17-18. The temple of God in heaven, in contrast to the temple of God on earth

(vs. 1-2), is opened with the Ark of the Covenant visible for all to see.

Because of the redemptive work of the Lamb, access to the Ark of the Covenant is no longer restricted only to the high priest. As a kingdom of priest redeemed by the Lamb (5:9-10), all believers enjoy the fullness of God's presence and His covenant promises (21:2-7, 22-27, Duvall, 156).

Such a glorious vision is accompanied by the harbingers of judgment:

“Flashes of lightning, rumblings of thunder, an earthquake, and severe hail.”

God is faithful to show grace and mercy (the ark). He is also faithful to send judgment and wrath. To know and love Jesus is to receive grace. To reject the Savior is to receive wrath. A question: are you God's friend or are you God's enemy? It is hard to imagine a more important question.

Conclusion: There is a humorous but insightful story about the 16th century Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) and his wonderful wife Katie. In *Reformation Rib: Celebrating Katherine von Bora*, James Cobb recounts the event: Katie: Doctor Luther had been in a despondent, sad mood for much too long. I don't recall if there was a reason for such a mood but I decided on a course of action. I dressed in black (*dons a black shawl or hat*)...and met him at the door.

Martin: Katie, you are in the color of mourning. Who died?

Katie: I spoke what I felt: “Your God died. At least so you act!” I suppose it was dramatic for me, but the shock of my words and actions did succeed. We did get him back and that was the point” (p. 12).

God is not dead. He has not died. An empty tomb stands as a perpetual monument that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (v. 15, *ESV*). Yes, we will be opposed and rejected by this world. Satan will raise up enemies who will persecute us and kill us. There will be people who will celebrate and rejoice over our deaths and apparent defeat. But, never forget. There is a resurrection day that awaits, a kingdom that is coming, and a reward for the servants who revere the name of Jesus. In the end, our God wins! So keep on and press on as you proclaim His gospel and pursue His glory. It is worth it all.